

selling secrets by the seashore by kuhaperuna

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: (Yes in 2012), (kind of), Alternate Universe - No Upside Down, Billy Is Australian Because I Said So, But Not Many Bitches :), Coming Out, Lesbian Scientists, M/M, Many Beaches, Meet-Cute, Neil Hargrove Can Suck My Dick So He's Not In This One, Period-Typical Homophobia, So Many Early 2010s References

Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove, Jonathan Byers, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington

Relationships: Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington

Status: Completed

Published: 2021-06-04

Updated: 2021-06-09

Packaged: 2022-03-31 14:38:31

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 2

Words: 11,901

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Steve Harrington is 15 years old when he meets a boy in Sydney and tells him his biggest secrets thinking they'll never meet again. He's 28 when he finds him in a crowded hotel bar in Honolulu, looking fine as hell.

1. Part I: Sydney, 2012

Notes for the Chapter:

I tweaked the characters ages a little; Steve is the same age as Nancy, Jonathan and Billy, and Max is a little older than in canon.

Steve didn't remember the last time he'd spent Christmas at Hawkins. Every October, his parents decided on a holiday destination and planned the vacation for the next two months. Three years prior had been Paris, two years ago Miami, the previous year Santa Barbara, and this year they were headed to Sydney, Australia.

"Make sure to bring us souvenirs," Carol told him on the last day of school before the break. They — Steve, Nancy, Carol and Tommy — were on the parking lot by Tommy's car. Steve hadn't driven his own to school that morning because his parents were supposed to pick him up so they could go straight to the airport. It had been decided weeks ago, the second the tickets had been bought.

"I always bring souvenirs," Steve said. An expensive perfume from the airport for Carol, anything containing alcohol or tobacco for Tommy. It was easy.

Nancy was another story. They'd only been dating a couple of weeks and she was technically Steve's first girlfriend (Emma Jordan in fourth grade didn't count; it was just one kiss under the stairs, and she'd dumped him the next day) so Steve had no idea what to get her.

Tommy never bought Carol anything even though at school, they were practically glued to each other. Carol was always either on Tommy's lap or holding his arm tightly. But Steve knew they barely talked; they preferred to just skive and make out. So, Tommy wasn't the right person to ask for advice. Not that he had the time, anyway.

A familiar red Honda pulled over and Steve was forced to leave his friends. Carol gave him a short hug, and Tommy clapped his back affectionately. He kissed Nancy awkwardly; the kind of kiss that isn't

just a peck, but not a proper, long goodbye kiss either.

“Have fun,” she said sweetly.

The Harringtons were all set for Sydney. The trunk and half the back seats were brimming with too many bags for their trip — though, the vacation was a little longer than usual this year because Christmas Eve fell on a Monday, so school ended on the 21st.

Mrs. Harrington was already clad in a sun dress and sunglasses, which looked odd because it had started raining icy sleet and she wore a heavy winter coat over the dress. Mr. Harrington sported khaki shorts and a pale blue, neat button down. It was as if they wanted people to know they were going away for Christmas.

“Are you sure you packed everything, Stevie?” his mom asked nervously. She was always fussy when they left on a trip, and Steve knew for a fact that she had packed whatever he might’ve left behind.

“Yeah, I’m sure,” he said.

“You’ll love the place we’ve got, Steve,” his dad said proudly. “There are beaches nearby, there’s breakfast, there’s a pool...”

“Why is there a pool if there are so many beaches?” Steve questioned.

“The more options the better, right?” his mom said cheerfully. Steve had never seen her swim.

They arrived at the airport three hours early, as per usual. His dad refused to go any earlier. They ate at an overpriced restaurant and while his parents went to have overpriced drinks, Steve went on a mission to browse the duty free. It was just like any other airport’s duty free, but at least it was something to do while he waited.

He bought some soda as well as snacks because he knew it was going to be a long flight, and considered getting a travel pillow but decided against it because they looked dumb. If he needed a pillow he could just ball up his hoodie and use that. Besides, he wasn’t planning on sleeping. He wanted to go through the entire catalog of movies on the little tv screen in front of his seat.

His mom was positively tipsy by the time they boarded, and Steve knew she'd drink more on the plane. For a woman who adored the glamour of traveling the world, she really hated flying. At least the faster she drank, the faster she would fall asleep and stop asking Steve about his girlfriend.

Steve got the window seat, thank god, and his mom sat in the aisle seat because she would no doubt have to run to the bathroom multiple times thanks to all the wine and cocktails.

They had to switch planes in Los Angeles, so the first flight wasn't very bad and Steve was tired enough to sleep when the flight to Sydney took off. He did indeed need to turn his hoodie into a pillow, but at least he didn't look dumb. Probably.

He woke up with a sore neck, a headache and a dry mouth. He'd never been drunk (though he'd had sips of his mom's wine; it wasn't good) but he imagined that's what a hangover felt like. He nursed his not-hangover with a Sprite.

The movie selection wasn't as extensive as he'd thought. The only good one he found was *Karate Kid* — the new one with Jackie Chan, not the ancient ones — and after that he had to get out his Nintendo 3DS. He had been hoping he wouldn't need it so soon; he didn't want it to run out of battery.

"I told you, you should've brought a book," his dad said while he rummaged his backpack. His mom was already snoring; she'd fallen asleep again around the time Mr. Han told Dre about his dead family.

"I don't like books," Steve said. Movies were hard enough to focus on, books were on a whole different level. His dad tutted disapprovingly.

He played *Mario Kart*, first. He was good at it, and always had been. He always came first when he played with Tommy, but mostly second if Carol was playing. She was probably the best *Mario Kart* player in the whole school, if not Hawkins.

Once he was sure his dad was too engrossed in a Dan Brown novel to care, Steve switched to *Dead or Alive: Dimensions*. Mr. Harrington

didn't approve of it, but Steve liked the characters. Leifang was his favourite, unless Tommy asked. In that case it was Ryu Hayabusa.

He spent the next... well, he wasn't really counting, but a *while* beating Bass Armstrong's ass. He only stopped to drink one of his sodas and eat potato chips and a Mars bar. When he got bored of the game, he took out his hoodie-pillow again and took a nap.

When he woke up, his mom was awake and looking slightly sick and anxious. There was bland airplane food being served, and she made Steve get some even though he claimed he wasn't hungry. The texture was off and there was no salt and the vegetables were slimy, but it wasn't the worst meal he'd had.

He ate his other Mars bar as dessert while checking out the movie selection again, just in case there was something he'd missed. He ended up watching *Cars 2* even though it was a kids' movie. He actually enjoyed it, but he'd never admit it.

His ass was positively sore from sitting when they finally landed in Sydney, and he was eager to get off the stuffy plane and the old woman behind him who had been farting every few minutes.

Steve barely paid attention to anything at Sydney airport, just followed his parents and waited anxiously for his phone to work again so he could text Nancy even though he didn't know what time it was in Indiana.

When they stepped outside, there was a waft of hot air and that both familiar and unfamiliar scent of a new country. The sky was heavy with clouds

There was already a Land Rover waiting for them. Mr. Harrington liked to rent a fancy car wherever they went, even in places where you drive on the other side of the road. He was the type of man to judge others based on their cars rather than anything else.

Steve watched the scenery pass by as they drove through the city. It was about a half an hour drive, and at first there was honestly less to see than he'd expected. It seemed just like any city.

The closer they got to their destination, though, the bigger and busier everything became. The first glimpse Steve got of the sea — deep blue and infinite — he got a strange chill down his spine. There was a whole street of terraced houses that promoted businesses that his mom despised, like tattoo and piercing parlours and Thai massages, as well intricate street art. Steve loved them.

Bondi beach stretched across the coast like a massive, sandy snake. It was still pretty early in the morning, but Steve could spot more surfers than he could count with his fingers. The waves were bigger than he'd seen anywhere else, even Santa Barbara in California. It looked very inviting.

They were staying in a rental apartment a short walk from Bondi Beach for the first couple of days. They usually stayed in hotels, but his mom had wanted a more “urban” experience so his dad had agreed on trying out an apartment for the weekend and then switching to a hotel in central Sydney.

Steve's room was painted a yellow tone. Not bright like the sun, not pastel, and not mustard, but the kind of yellow that smells like citrus and feels like a fresh breeze in summer. He set his bags down and flopped onto the bed. It was much softer than his own, and he sank deep in it.

He had two texts from Nancy since messaging her at the airport.

Glad you had a safe flight <3

I miss you already <3

Steve wasn't sure how to answer. He missed Nancy too, but sending a heart felt weird. *Girls* sent hearts. He scratched his head and typed:

miss u too

He then got up to snap a picture of the view from his bedroom for her. It wasn't that exciting — you couldn't even see the beach — but there was a pretty row of victorian houses on the opposite street.

There was a soft knock on his door. He didn't answer; his parents always came in anyway.

“Your dad and I are going to grab some coffee to fight off the jet lag. Will you come with us?” his mom asked. Despite the summery affair she’d worn on the way to Sydney, she’d already changed her clothes. She still had the same large sun hat, but her dress was a different cut and pattern and she wore tall heels.

“I think I’ll stay here, settle in,” Steve lied. He never stayed; every holiday, it was a routine for him to explore the new city on his own as soon as he got away from his family.

“Alright. We’ll be back in an hour or so,” his mom said. She probably knew he’d be out the door as soon as they left, but was too tired to argue about it.

Once she was gone, Steve changed into jean shorts that his dad claimed had more holes than fabric and a faded t-shirt. He grabbed the house key he had been given, his wallet that he’d packed full of Australian dollars which he’d dad had given to him at the airport, and his phone in case he wanted to take pictures.

The first place he visited was Bondi Beach, since it was the easiest to find. He didn’t have his swimming shorts, but he had a good time just walking along the beach and watching people surf, tan and play volley ball.

When the sun had risen so high it was too hot to stay at the beach, he found the nearest juice bar and ordered a mango passion fruit juice to quench his thirst. It came in an icy cold, clear plastic cup and with a bright green straw.

He slurped his juice while walking around the neighbourhood to see if there was anything interesting nearby. He found a modern art sculpture that could’ve portrayed just about anything from a turd to a dragon, a funny looking building and a man playing tin drums. He gave him a 2 dollar tip.

After grabbing a burger at the greasiest joint he could find, he found a walkway on the southern side of the beach. He followed it, walking past impressive rock formations moulded by the ocean, and ended up on another beach that the signs called Tamarama Beach. It was smaller and less crowded than Bondi Beach, but the ocean looked just

as beautiful there.

The walkaway continued, probably to yet another beach, but Steve didn't feel like going and settled on the warm sands of Tamarama Beach instead. He didn't have a blanket or a towel to sit on, but he didn't really mind. The sun warmed his face for the first time since summer. As much as he wanted to have a white Christmas for once, he still preferred heat waves to a Hawkins winter, which tended to be gloomy and grey, rainy instead of snowy and without a ray of sunlight.

The moment was ruined by a red-headed girl, a couple of years younger than him, who ran past him, skidded on the sand and showered Steve with it. He was lucky it didn't get in his eye.

"What the—"

He was interrupted by a group of boys who ran after the girl. This time he knew to shield his face from the hot sand.

"Piss off!" the girl screamed at the boys, who had reached and circled her.

"You'll regret it, Mayfield!" one of the boys shouted at him. Steve noticed that he was limping slightly, and there was red under his nose.

"You want me to punch you again?" the girl asked, taking a fighting stance. Steve looked around; there weren't any adults around, at least not any who gave a shit.

One of the boys grabbed the girl's arm, and Steve was up on his feet in an instant. "Hey!" he called at them. He wasn't sure what else to say, though. He'd never broken up a fight before.

"Stay out of it," the girl snarled and snatched her arm from the boy.

"Come on, leave her alone," Steve said, ignoring her.

"I said stay out of it!" the girl said. She pushed past the boys, kicked Steve in the shin so hard he almost fell over, and ran away.

“Thanks a lot, drongo,” the seeming leader of the boys — the one whose nose the girl had previously punched — said bitterly.

They ran off without another word and Steve was left dumbfounded, with an aching shin and a confused frown.

“Whatever,” he muttered, brushed off the sand and settled back down. Maybe Australian kids were just weird. He closed his eyes and continued basking in the sun.

He didn’t have peace for more than five minutes. Something blocked the sun, casting a shadow over his face.

“Do you mind?” he groaned. He opened his eyes to see a boy around his age with long, curly hair, a t-shirt with clumsily cut off sleeves, and a surfer’s tan looming over him. He looked just as annoyed as Steve felt.

“Have you seen a girl?” the boy asked. “Ginger, about yay high?”

“Why do you ask?” Steve asked doubtfully. This boy was older than the ones who had been after the girl so he probably wasn’t with them, but he didn’t want to send another bully after her.

“She’s my sister and I’m supposed to be looking after her. Have you seen her or not?” the boy said in a sort of mean, condescending voice. Steve didn’t like him one bit.

“Yeah, she ran past here,” Steve told him. “Some boys were bullying her. I wanted to help, but—”

“She wasn’t being bullied, you idiot!” the boy said and slapped a hand on his face. “*They’re* probably the ones who needed help. Now I’ll have to find her before the coppers do, *again*.”

“Oh. I’m... sorry?” Steve said.

“Yeah, no drama,” the boy said sarcastically and left as quickly as he had appeared.

Steve wasn’t really feeling Tamarama Beach anymore, so he just got up and started walking back the way he came. The walk back felt

much more taxing, possibly because the day had grown much hotter or because he'd spent the last half an hour sitting in the sun. Either way, it felt like an eternity before he was back at Bondi Beach.

Like always, his parents gave him some shit for going off on his own on the first day of the vacation; he could've gotten lost, could've been mugged, could've fallen over and gotten a stain on his shirt etc. It was over fairly soon though, and Steve was dragged into the car and to a nice Japanese restaurant for dinner.

"So, where did you go on your little adventure?" his mom asked over plates of sushi.

"Just around the neighbourhood," Steve said vaguely.

"You wore sunscreen, right?" his mom fussed.

"Yeah," Steve lied. He hadn't remembered, but he'd always been very unlikely to get sunburnt so he figured it was okay. He'd remember tomorrow.

"We found this lovely little park, didn't we, honey?" his mom said, and his dad nodded silently next to her as he struggled to keep nigiri between his chopsticks. "It's so nice to be around so much green again, isn't it? Indiana is just so *bland* in winter."

"Yeah," Steve repeated, mostly to humour her even though he agreed.

"You know, we were thinking of going to the Museum of Contemporary Art tomorrow. Will you come with us?" she said.

"No, I don't think that's really my thing," Steve said truthfully. He didn't understand modern art. It all looked like just a bunch of lines to him, and he felt stupid when people explained the deep meaning behind each work to him.

"Oh. Well, honey, do you think you'll be okay on your own?" his mom said anxiously.

"I made it out alive today, didn't I?" Steve pointed out. His mom tutted; she didn't appreciate that kind of humour.

“Okay, just be back at the apartment by five. We have a dinner reservation,” she said.

—

The next day, Steve took a picture of Bondi Beach for Nancy and then took a bus and a train to central Sydney. He’d been in big cities before — as big as New York and Chicago — but seeing them was always just as astounding. He felt incredibly small in the midst of towering modern buildings, wide streets and masses of people.

While wandering around aimlessly, he came across an ad promoting SeaLife and figured it was an easy way to kill a few hours. Using the nearest free wi-fi, he googled the directions and hopped on the metro again; it was only a couple of stations away.

He’d never been to a SeaLife before, so he didn’t know what to expect other than, well, fish and water. Something he definitely didn’t expect was the boy from Tamarama Beach, the one who had been looking for his violent little sister. He looked much like he had then, except he was now sporting a nasty bruise on his cheek.

The boy wasn’t going in or getting out of SeaLife. He stood still a few feet from the main entrance, holding a sign that said:

SEALIFE KILLS!

Steve walked up to him, confused, and asked: “What are you doing?”

“I’m *protesting*,” the boy said.

“Oh. Okay,” Steve said. He still didn’t quite understand. In his mind, protests involved more people and more... action? His dad always said that protestors were nothing but vandalising anarchists, but then again his dad was wrong about a lot of things.

“What are *you* doing? You’re not gonna go in, are you?” the boy asked.

“What if I was?” Steve challenged. The boy couldn’t stop him if he wanted to see some fish.

“Do you know how big the ocean is?” the boy asked sharply.

“Big,” Steve said, because he had no idea *exactly* how big it was, but he listened well enough in school that he knew that Earth was 70-something percent water.

“Bigger than that building behind me, yeah?” the boy said and nodded towards SeaLife. Steve looked. Yes, the ocean was definitely bigger. There was also a pair of very annoyed-looking staff members staring right at him and the boy.

“What about it?” Steve asked.

“You don’t actually think the animals are happy to be there, do you? The ocean is their home and they’re forced into these tiny little tanks just because some capitalist bludger wants to make money out of people staring at them,” the boy explained heatedly.

“Well... how do you know if they like it there or not? It’s not like they can talk,” Steve pointed out.

“Would you like it if you had to live in a cupboard your whole life?” the boy asked. Steve wasn’t sure if it was a Harry Potter reference or not. (He had never read the books, but Nancy and her friend Barb talked about them all the time and he'd seen the first two movies.)

“No,” Steve said, because he recalled that Harry had been pretty miserable in the cupboard.

“Exactly,” the boy said.

The annoyed-looking members of staff were now accompanied by two burly men in guard’s uniforms. The staff members pointed at Steve and the boy and gestured angrily.

“Well, whether that’s true or not, I don’t think *they* agree with you,” Steve said.

The boy glanced at the adults. “Shit,” he muttered, dropped his sign and started running.

“Oi!” one of the guards yelled and went after him. The other one

came after Steve.

"I'm not with him!" Steve yelled but the guard didn't seem to care, so he took off and followed the boy. He reached him fairly quickly even though the boy was a fast runner.

"Piss off!" the boy said to him as they ran side by side along the pier. It seemed to go on forever and the guards, though slowly but surely falling behind, were determined to catch them.

"Tell them I wasn't with you and I'll leave you alone!" Steve said.

"You *were* with me!" the boy pointed out.

Then, so quick that Steve could barely register it, the boy grabbed his wrist and they made a sudden turn while a large flock of Chinese tourists blocked the guards' view of them. They hid behind a thick concrete column that held up a long bridge they'd ran under earlier, and held their breath.

Steve was sure the plan would fail, but a few seconds later the guards ran past without a single glance their way.

"I can't believe that worked," Steve laughed breathlessly, jittery with nerves.

"It always does," the boy said proudly as he watched the guards go.

"Always? You do this often?" Steve said. No wonder the staff had looked so sour.

"Never been caught," the boy said and shrugged.

"I guess that's sort of impressive," Steve admitted. "I'm sorry if I ruined your protest."

"Nah, they would've been after me anyway. You were just an innocent bystander," the boy said, less hostile now.

"I'm Steve, by the way," Steve said, remembering his manners, and offered his hand.

“Billy,” the boy said, but didn’t shake Steve’s hand.

“Do you... do you wanna hang out? I could get us ice cream or something, as an apology,” Steve suggested. "It's just that I don't know anyone here and it's kind of boring on my own."

Billy just looked at him weird and said: “I have to go home, to look after my sister.”

“Oh. Right. You found her, then?” Steve said awkwardly.

“Yeah. Got there before those boys were dead,” Billy said. Steve laughed nervously at first, but Billy didn’t look like he was kidding.

“Maybe I’ll see you around?” Steve said as Billy started walking away.

“Rather not,” Billy said without looking back.

—

“I met someone today,” Steve told Nancy on the phone as he threw himself onto his bed. It was late in Hawkins (Nancy refused to say how late, so Steve assumed *very*) but it was good to hear her voice again.

“Really?” Nancy said.

“Yeah. His name is Billy, he has a psycho little sister and he hates SeaLife,” Steve said.

“He sure sounds like a character,” Nancy commented.

“I wish I’d gotten his number or something, it’s so boring not to hang out with anyone,” Steve said.

“Sounds like I have competition,” Nancy giggled.

“I’m not gay!” Steve snapped, a little too harshly and a little too quickly.

“It was just a joke,” Nancy said, sounding insulted.

“Yeah, whatever,” Steve muttered. “How’s Hawkins?”

“Same old. It snowed a little today, but it melted right away,” Nancy said.

“Damn. Maybe next year,” Steve said hopefully.

“Yeah, maybe.”

—

Spending Christmas in a five star hotel meant a Christmassy room service menu, gifts from the fancier souvenir shops, a long, sappy call with Nancy, and a swim in the pool after dinner while Mr. And Mrs. Harrington headed to the bar.

In other words, it was pretty lame.

On Boxing Day, Steve wandered the furthest he’d been so far. He hopped on a train — the letter T, because it was Tommy’s birthday — and took out his Nintendo, planning to stay on the train as long as he had the patience. It was plenty of time to hone his Mario Kart skills. Maybe he’d beat Carol once school started again.

The station he got off at was, according to the signs and boards, called Parramatta. It was right by a big shopping centre, which Steve spent the next hour or so exploring. He got an iced coffee at Starbucks, found a fun shirt with a shark pattern in one of the men’s clothes shops, and bought a new game for his Nintendo.

He was looking for a place to have lunch in when someone behind him said: “Are you stalking me or something?”

“What?” he said and turned around. It was Billy. The bruise on his face had turned an ugly yellow colour.

“It’s the third time I’ve seen you,” Billy said.

“Maybe *you’re* stalking *me*. How would I have known you were here?” Steve pointed out.

Billy shrugged. “I was gonna gonna go smoke a durry, d’ya wanna

come?" he asked in a blunt voice.

"A what?" Steve asked, confused.

"You know, a smoke. A cigarette," Billy clarified.

"Oh. Okay," Steve said. He'd only smoked a cigarette once — well, split one with Tommy — and he had coughed a lot and his throat had hurt the whole night. He didn't mind the smell because he had a cool cousin who smoked and it reminded him of her, but he definitely didn't want to smoke himself.

Billy led Steve out, and they found a quiet spot by a flower bed. Billy sat down on the edge and Steve followed suit. He tried to ignore the buzz of insects behind him in the bushes.

Billy took two small bags and a lighter out of his shorts' pocket. One bag had filters and papers, and one tobacco.

"You roll your own cigarettes?" Steve asked. He had seen some older kids at school do it, but theirs were always clumsy and falling apart.

"Yeah. It's cheaper," Billy said as he tucked tobacco onto the paper. He licked the paper and sealed the roll neatly. It looked a lot better than the ones the kids in Hawkins smoked.

"I don't smoke," Steve said, feeling a little dumb.

Fortunately, Billy just looked at him weird and said: "I didn't expect you to."

They didn't talk while Billy smoked. Steve looked around nervously, thinking that any moment an adult would come tell them to stop or call the police. Billy was too young to smoke, even in Australia, right?

But no one came to bother them. The worst they got was a dirty look from an older woman.

"I can hang out tomorrow," Billy said finally when he was done smoking and crushed the stub with his heel.

“Really?” Steve said, perking up.

“Yeah. I’m bored, too,” Billy admitted. “Where are you staying?”

“I don’t remember the name of the hotel. It’s close to Hyde Park, though,” Steve said.

“Okay. Meet you by Archibald Fountain around seven?” Billy suggested.

“In the evening?” Steve asked. Billy nodded. “I promised to have dinner with my parents then, but I’ll come right after.”

“Okay. I’ll be there around half past,” Billy said.

—

Steve scarfed down his bolognese so fast at dinner the next day that he was done just ten minutes after the food had arrived.

“I gotta go, thanks for the food,” he said, dropped his fork and chugged the rest of his water.

“Why are you in such a hurry?” his mom asked concernedly.

“Got stuff to do,” Steve said. He got up and left before they could ask any more questions.

Billy was indeed waiting for him by Archibald Fountain, sitting on the edge and smoking another cigarette. Cool water droplets sprayed onto Steve’s skin as he walked to him, which was refreshing in the dense, hot air.

“So, you’re the local. What are we doing?” Steve asked. He didn’t sit next to Billy; he was afraid the other boy would push him into the water if he said something stupid.

“You’ll see. It’s gnarly,” Billy said, grinning. When he got up, something in his backpack clinked.

It turned out that Billy’s idea of ‘gnarly’ was trespassing to a golf course that was closed for the night. Steve had been to golf clubs

before with his dad, but in his experience they were deadly boring during the day. At night, though, there was no one around except them, and there was a constant feeling of adrenaline.

“Have you done this before?” Steve asked in a hushed voice as they made their way across a big green field.

“A couple of times. It’s fine,” Billy insisted. His backpack kept jingling happily as they walked.

They found what appeared to be the highest peak of the golf course. It looked over the green plains, the setting sun and the surrounding city. Billy sat on the grass, so Steve did too.

Billy opened his backpack to reveal the source of the constant clinking. There were six glass bottles of beer; three for each boy.

“Cheers,” Billy said and threw a bottle at Steve.

The beer didn’t taste good. Steve hadn’t expected it to; he had seen Tommy drink a whole bottle once, and Tommy had puked all over as soon as he was done. Steve didn’t feel like puking, thankfully, but that could’ve just been because he didn’t try to shotgun it like Tommy.

“Is this all we’re doing? Just... sitting here and drinking?” Steve asked because he thought Billy had said he was bored. This didn’t feel very exciting.

“I came up with the beers and the golf course, you come up with something to do,” Billy said. He tried not to make a face when he drank his beer, but Steve could tell he didn’t like it either.

“Okay...” Steve chewed on the inside of his cheek. What did people usually do when they drank? He hadn’t been invited to any parties yet — not ones with alcohol involved, at least — but based on movies he knew that truth or dare was a pretty common choice. It didn’t sound like something Billy would like to play, though. “Do you have any music?”

Billy did have music on his phone; he had Spotify. When Steve glanced at his library, he saw that Billy’s music taste varied from 80s

hard metal to 90s pop and from pop punk to hiphop. It was like he listened to anything and everything as long as there was a beat and a melody.

They listened to all the hit songs that had been playing everywhere that year, like *Gangnam Style*, *Party Rock Anthem*, *We Are Young* and *Everybody Talks*, and secretly Steve pretended he was at a party.

As their beers emptied gradually they became more comfortable with each other and got to talking. Billy talked about his protests at SeaLife, and how he was sometimes joined by a couple of other kids. Usually they were stopped after an hour or so. He also talked about his sister, Max, who had a tendency to get in trouble. (And so did Billy. Apparently his bruise was from a classmate who had talked shit about his family.)

Steve, in turn, talked about Tommy, Carol and Nancy. He told Billy about the time Nancy's little brother and his little gang of gremlins infiltrated the high school to "pay back for the injustices they'd faced" and stole all of Nancy's books, which led to an epic chase in the hallways. He also talked about the time Carol got dress-coded and flashed the teacher in protest. That one earned him a laugh.

The sun had completely set and the moon emerged by the time they finished their second beers. Flo Rida's *Whistle* was playing and Steve felt a little fuzzy, but not in a bad way. He guessed that he was tipsy.

"Come on," Billy said and got up. "There's another place I know we can go to."

—

They laid under a pier at a quiet lookout, listening to the waves crash. The ground was rough and hard under Steve's back, and his final beer bottle felt cold in his hand. Billy's arm was against his, radiating heat, and their legs brushed together every time one of them shifted.

"Tell me a secret," Steve said, breaking the silence.

"What? Why?" Billy asked, eyebrows knit together.

“We’ll never meet each other again. Might as well,” Steve explained.

“I dunno, we’ve been doing a pretty good job of dumping into each other so far,” Billy pointed out.

“Come on. You live in Sydney, Australia, and I live in a depressing little town in the Midwest,” Steve pressed.

“Fine, you first,” Billy said after a moment. “If yours is lame I won’t tell mine.”

Steve rolled his eyes and then thought hard. There was a lot he could tell Billy; how much he really just wanted a normal Christmas, how surprisingly difficult it was to be a good boyfriend, how he was already failing math and if he didn’t get into college he’d have no choice but to work for his dad.

But there was something else. Something that had been bugging him for a long time, ever since he had watched all of the Pirates of the Caribbean movies in one sitting with Tommy. Steve wasn’t sure if Billy was the type of person to be okay with it — in fact, he doubted it — but if he was going to tell anyone then he’d tell someone he’d never have to see again.

“I think I like guys,” Steve said. Just saying it out loud felt weird. He wasn’t gay. He liked Nancy, he liked her *a lot*, thought she was hot, thought about her all the time. But Johnny Depp was hot too, just in a slightly different way.

“You’re not... hitting on me, are you?” Billy asked uncertainly.

“No!” Steve said quickly. “I have a girlfriend.”

“But you said you like guys,” Billy pointed out.

“I like girls too,” Steve said. He’d heard the word somewhere; usually in TV shows where girls made out with each other but ended up with guys anyway. “I think I’m bi.”

“Oh. Okay,” Billy said, and that was that. He didn’t call Steve slurs or punch him, and in Steve’s eyes that was a victory. He fought back a smile.

“Your turn,” he said, feeling significantly lighter.

Billy hesitated for a moment, and Steve waited patiently. “I used to live in California. I was pretty young so I don’t remember a lot, and Max was even smaller. Our dad, er... he wasn’t great. So our parents divorced and our mom took us here,” he said finally. “She had some family here. Our aunt, and some cousin we’ve met like, once.”

“Are you happy here?” Steve asked.

“Yeah, I think so. Happier than I would’ve been there,” Billy said.

They continued telling each other secrets after that; it was easier once the big ones were out of the way.

“I’m really bad at math. Like, I can barely do basic equations. It’s embarrassing as hell,” Steve said, but didn’t feel an ounce of shame even though it was one of his biggest insecurities.

“I complain about Max all the time, but she’s actually pretty cool,” Billy said. Steve didn’t have siblings of his own, but he imagined based on Nancy and Mike’s relationship that admitting that you tolerate your own sister was probably harder than coming out of the closet.

“That one time Nancy beat me in Mario Kart, I let her,” Steve said.

“I listen to One Direction sometimes,” Billy said. Steve thought it was fair enough. He didn’t listen to the band that much, but they were hot.

“I didn’t go see *The Avengers* with Tommy because I wanted to see *Hunger Games* with Nancy,” Steve said. He had cried when Rue died.

“I wanna move out of Sydney. I’m just *bored*, here,” Billy said. Steve didn’t really understand why; he would’ve killed to live in a big city like Sydney, where everybody didn’t know each other and there was something new to discover every day. He didn’t say anything, though. Billy hadn’t said anything about his secrets.

“I don’t have any big dreams, and I feel kinda weird about it because everyone else does,” Steve said.

“Is this a bad time to say that I have a big dream?” Billy said.

“What is it?” Steve asked, turning to look at Billy.

“I wanna be a marine biologist,” Billy said in a strange, soft voice, the crashing of salty waves as his background choir.

“Why?” Steve asked. He wasn’t really that surprised, not with the whole protest thing at SeaLife.

“So much of the ocean is unexplored. They discover something new every time they go deep enough, you know?” Billy said.

“Like... giant squids or something?” Steve said. He thought about the angler fish in *Finding Nemo*. “That sounds kinda scary.”

“I think it’s cool. Like, imagine how sick it would be to find something completely new,” Billy said.

“I guess it’d be cool. As long as it doesn’t eat you, first,” Steve admitted.

“I wanna go deeper than anyone’s ever gone before,” Billy said. He had a hungry, determined look in his eyes.

“Don’t get eaten alive,” Steve said.

“I won’t,” Billy said, smiling.

—

Steve didn't see Billy again after that night, didn't get his number or even his last name. He told himself that it was for the best because of the secrets, but a part of him was sad to watch Sydney grow smaller and smaller until all he could see was clouds and the sea.

Notes for the Chapter:

Part 2 coming soon :)

2. Part II: Honolulu, 2025

Steve wasn't unhappy, per se. He was just... well, as a boy in Sydney over a decade ago had said, *bored*.

He had steady job in his father's company that he could really work any day or hour he wanted, a cat who shredded all his socks but gave him a reason to live on bad days, and a nice two bedroom in a better part of Detroit. He had weekends off and more than enough money to spare.

It could've been someone else's dream, just not his. Still, he stuck with it. He'd never had dreams or goals, so what else would he do?

"You wouldn't understand, would you?" he mumbled to Freddie, who was happily purring on his chest while he was sprawled on his back on his bed. Freddie didn't answer. He answered sometimes, with a high-pitched meow, but that was usually only when he was hungry.

He sighed, and that was enough for Freddie's slumber to be disturbed and the cat jumped off the bed, clawing at his chest painfully as he did so.

"Well, fuck you too," Steve called after him. Freddie ran out of the room with his orange tail high up in the air.

After a couple of more minutes of brooding, his phone rang. People didn't call him that often; he didn't have many friends anymore, not after graduation, and the only people he regularly talked to apart from his co-workers were Nancy Wheeler and Jonathan Byers, who ironically were both his exes and were now engaged.

So, it wasn't very surprising that it was Nancy calling him.

"Hey," Steve said tiredly.

"You sound happy to hear from me," Nancy said dryly.

"Yeah, I'm delighted," Steve said in the most depressed voice he could muster.

“You’re on speaker. Jonathan’s here too,” Nancy said.

“Hi,” Jonathan said, his voice more muffled than Nancy’s so he was probably farther away.

“Hi, Jonathan,” Steve greeted.

“We decided on the wedding date,” Nancy said carefully. Steve sighed. He hadn’t dated either of them in years, and they still thought he wasn’t over it sometimes.

“Okay?” he said. “Whenever it is, I’ll make it work. You know I’ll be there.”

“Yeah, we know,” Jonathan said. He’d always been the more reasonable of the two — meaning, he wasn’t as fussy talking about his and Nancy’s relationship with Steve.

“Okay,” Steve said again. “Great.”

“There was actually something I wanted to ask you,” Jonathan said slowly.

“Yes, I’ll be your best man. You don’t have to ask,” Steve said. They’d agreed on it the day they broke up seven years ago; their relationship had never been very romantic either way, and they’d decided to be just friends. In fact, Steve considered Jonathan his best friend now.

“I told you,” Jonathan said to Nancy. Steve could almost see her roll her eyes.

“So, when and where?” Steve asked.

“March 1st, Honolulu,” Nancy said.

Steve made a face. “You’re having a beach wedding?”

“Well... neither of us wanted a church wedding,” Nancy said defensively.

“If it’s rainy or windy I’m not coming,” Steve said. He wasn’t serious, of course. He’d go to Nancy and Jonathan’s wedding if he had to hike

across Sahara.

“It’s not gonna rain,” Nancy said.

—

It rained.

It was more like a storm, really. Umbrellas were no use, everyone was soaked, the waves came dangerously close to the wedding and Nancy’s hair and makeup was ruined, but her and Jonathan insisted on keeping the wedding going so they did.

In his improvised speech (his cards had become soggy and unreadable in the rain) Steve said that only people who truly loved each other would go through such a shit-storm of a wedding and still be happy about it. Afterwards, Nancy told him that only a great best man would go through a whole speech that uncomfortably cold and wet.

It was bittersweet. Steve was genuinely happy for his friends and the twang of jealousy he would’ve felt years ago was nowhere to be seen, but he was still sort of envious. He’d never had anything like Nancy and Jonathan had. Nancy had been the closest, but he could never imagine building a life with her. Then again, that had been in high school, and in Steve’s opinion no one should have to worry about that kind of stuff at that age.

Jonathan had been his last long relationship, if you could call it that, and after that there had only been a string of casual flings, several Tinder matches left unmessaged and too many cases of ghosting.

So, maybe Steve was jealous after all. It was probably a normal emotion to feel at a wedding, especially one where your exes were getting married, but Steve still felt guilty about it.

The wedding party itself was indoors, thank god. It was at the same hotel all the guests were staying in, similar to the ones Steve and his family had stayed in during their Christmas holidays.

The hall they’d reserved for the party was stuffy and humid with soaking wet guests, but everyone seemed to be in a better mood now

that they were out of the rain. Nancy and Jonathan certainly were; they looked at each other like they wanted to skip the party and get straight to the honeymoon part.

Steve used to be the king of parties in high school, enjoyed them a little too much in college, and now preferred nights at home with Netflix and Freddie. The constant chatter and the dozens of strangers made his brow sweat and his mouth dry. So, after mingling for what felt like forever, Steve excused himself for a moment and headed to one of the hotel's bars, the one that was the furthest away from the party. It was busy, with no one wanting to be outside in the rain, but he managed to find an empty seat and ordered a mojito.

He took out his phone while he drank, mindlessly chewing on the straw while he went through emails and other shit he needed to sort through for work. Nancy had made him promise to ignore work while there, but it's not like he was actually answering the emails, he was just looking at them and thinking about *how* to answer.

Okay, maybe he was cheating, but he needed a break from the party.

"You know you're supposed to suck it, not chew it, right?" someone said next to him.

"Huh?" Steve said absentmindedly, eyes still on his phone.

"The straw?" the stranger said.

"What— Oh." Steve looked at the straw, which was now flat with teeth marks.

He turned to look at the stranger. The first thing he saw was the drink, which he assumed was rum and coke, and had a perfectly undamaged straw. Then he noticed the casual shirt that was unbuttoned almost to the man's navel, and it would've looked kind of sleazy on anyone else but looked *great* on this guy, showing off his toned, tan chest. Then, there were the sunglasses, and the long, curly hair that had been pulled into a loose bun, and then the *smile*, and that's when Steve remembered.

"Oh, shit," he said, dumbfounded.

“Yeah. Crikey,” Billy echoed in a nervous, strained voice.

“You, uh... You look great,” Steve said.

“I know. You do too,” Billy said.

Steve wasn't sure what to think. The whole *thing* with him and Billy had been that they'd shared secrets with each other thinking they'd never meet again. Seeing him, in Steve's mind, was like a cruel twist of fate, and judging by the mixed confusion and frustration on Billy's face, he thought the same.

On one hand, Steve felt a rising panic, but on another he felt oddly comforted. He'd known Billy less than a week over ten years ago, but out of everyone on the entire island *he* knew Steve the best, better than the bride Steve had known since junior year and the groom who had chosen him as his best man years ago.

“This is weird.” He hadn't meant to say it out loud.

“Tell me about it,” Billy chuckled. “What are you doing here anyway?”

“Wedding,” Steve said.

“Ah. That explains the tux,” Billy said. He frowned, deep in thought, and asked: “Not *your* wedding, is it?”

“No, I'm the best man,” Steve said and laughed dryly.

“Oh. Shouldn't you be like, *at the wedding* then?” Billy pointed out.

“I'm just taking a break, I'm gonna go back,” Steve said. To be fair, he wasn't sure if he wanted to go back. He kind of wanted to go to his room, throw his tux on the floor and watch Netflix in a soft hotel robe. “What are *you* doing here?”

“Work,” Billy said.

“Oh, like marine stuff?” Steve asked excitedly. He remembered how impressed he had been of Billy's passion for the ocean; he'd never experienced anything like it himself.

“Yeah, marine stuff,” Billy snorted.

“Are you, like, researching whales or saving turtles or something?” Steve asked quickly.

“No, actually,” Billy said patiently. “Turns out, I didn’t have the patience to study marine biology. Not the whole way, at least.”

“So... what *do* you do?” Steve asked.

“I’m behind the camera, usually,” Billy said.

“Like shooting documentaries? That’s so cool,” Steve said, genuinely impressed.

“It’s not with David Attenborough so don’t get your knickers wet,” Billy said amusedly. “But yeah. I can show you some of the stuff I shot yesterday, if you wanna see.”

“Wait, for real?” Steve said with wide eyes.

“Yeah, for real,” Billy confirmed.

—

They finished their drinks and Steve followed Billy out of the bar. Steve was feeling weirdly nervous, and not just because he was going up to an extremely attractive man’s hotel room. Talking with Billy, even for just a few minutes at the bar, had felt more natural than talking with most of the guests at the wedding.

“It’s just raw footage,” Billy explained in the elevator, “so it’s not gonna look like what you see on TV. It’s still pretty sick though, if I say so myself.”

Billy’s room was, surprisingly, on the same floor as Steve’s. It looked just like his too, only mirrored and without the mess. Billy sat down by the small wooden desk, opened his MacBook and clicked through some folders until he found what he was looking for.

“Come on, sit down,” Billy said, and Steve grabbed the extra chair he pointed towards.

The videos were breathtaking. Something about the way Billy had filmed it made it look magical, like the fish and other ocean animals were flying. The ocean floor was like another world, not like anything Steve had ever seen before. In one clip, Billy's hand extended from behind the camera to pet a friendly spinner dolphin that had, according to Billy, followed the crew around the whole day.

Every now and then Billy would pause the video to tell Steve about the various animals they'd filmed.

"You see that king crab, there?" he said and pointed at an orange long-legged creature that made its way along the ocean floor.

"Yeah," Steve said.

"You can't really tell in the video, but he was huge, biggest one I've seen around here," Billy said excitedly.

"Damn," was all Steve could say because as impressed as he was, he didn't really know how big king crabs were supposed to be in the first place.

"And that hammerhead?" Billy said as a large hammerhead shark glided into view. "The team I'm working with has been tracking her for years. Hammerheads don't swim in those parts often, but this one keeps returning to the same coast."

"Why?" Steve asked.

"We don't know. Maybe she's protecting a family that lives nearby. That's what Kai's grandmother thinks," Billy said, eyes locked on the shark.

"Who's Kai?" Steve asked.

"Kailani Kahaulelio, the head of the team — she's directing and producing as well — she's *amazing*," Billy rambled. "She has discovered more about ocean life in the Pacific during the past five years than most people in the field do in their whole life. She's up for a Nobel and everything."

"She does sound amazing," Steve agreed.

“And get this, her wife already *has* a Nobel prize for her environmental research,” Billy said.

“Jesus, talk about a power couple,” Steve said.

“I could introduce you, if you want,” Billy said lightly.

“*What?* Really?” Steve said, tearing his eyes off the screen.

“Yeah, there’s this dinner thing and I was supposed to bring a plus one but she kind of bailed,” Billy explained awkwardly.

“Who were you gonna bring?” Steve asked. A part of him (which he ignored, thank you very much) felt a twinge of jealousy, as if it was any of his business who Billy wanted to bring to some fancy dinner. He didn’t know if Billy even considered him a friend.

“Max. Apparently you can fly your sister out halfway across an ocean to meet feminist icons she’s been dying to talk to, but one word from her long distance girlfriend who somehow happens to be on the same island, and she’s gone for the rest of the trip,” Billy grumbled.

“Well, I don’t have a long distance girlfriend so you can count on me,” Steve said.

“Does that, er... mean you’re single?” Billy asked carefully.

Steve would’ve loved more than anything to answer, but his phone rang before he could.

“It’s the groom,” he said apologetically.

“You better answer,” Billy said with a raised eyebrow.

“Where the hell are you?” Jonathan asked the second he picked up.

“Sorry, man. I just... I don’t know, I got overwhelmed and needed to get out for a while. I’ll be right back,” Steve said.

“Yeah, just get back here, okay? Nancy’s dad is driving me crazy,” Jonathan said in a pained voice.

“Yeah, just give me a minute,” Steve said. Jonathan hung up before he could say goodbye.

“Wedding drama?” Billy said amusedly.

“Yeah, sorry, I should go. But, uh...” Steve looked around anxiously until he spotted a pen on the desk. He grabbed it and wrote his number on the closest flat surface that wasn’t hotel furniture, which happened to be the back of Billy’s hand. “Here’s my number. Text me the details about the dinner thing, okay?”

“Okay,” Billy said, looking at the number with a puzzled expression.

“It was nice to meet you again,” Steve said as he patted his pockets to make sure he had everything with him.

“You too, Steve,” Billy said.

—

The rest of the wedding was what 15-year-old Steve would’ve called a snoozefest. Nancy’s dad was indeed driving Jonathan insane; he had always preferred Steve. Old high school classmates that Steve had never expected to see again kept coming to him and asking what he did these days. An older woman (Nancy’s aunt, if he remembered correctly) asked him to dance every other song and the one time he did agree to do it, she was very handsy.

The only highlight was when Jim Hopper, who had married Jonathan’s mother some years ago, gave the most awkward and the most entertaining speech Steve had ever heard. Steve had to fetch him two shots of whiskey right after.

He fell asleep as soon as he got back to his room. In fact, he might have sleep walked there because he didn’t remember actually getting into an elevator, and he certainly didn’t remember getting in bed.

Either way, he felt incredibly guilty when he realised that Billy had texted him that night and he didn’t see it until 10 in the morning.

dinner is at eight on tuesday, we can meet in the lobby around 7:30

wear your tux

Steve glanced at his tux, which was a crumpled mess on the ground. He recalled having spilled a drink on it when Mike Wheeler told a particularly funny joke, which had probably actually been a really bad joke and Steve had just had too many glasses of wine. He'd need to get it dry cleaned.

I'll be there, he typed and hit send.

He also had a long string of messages from Nancy, all in lower caps and with three typos in total, so she had definitely brought one of the expensive champagne bottles back to her and Jonathan's room. The first ones were about how much she appreciated that Steve was still their friend despite their history, and the final two ones were (if Steve depicted them properly) suggesting a threesome.

Jonathan had messaged him too, to apologise for the spam from Nancy, and to wish him a good night. His newest text was from just ten minutes ago asking if he wanted to go to the beach with him while Nancy nursed her hangover at the hotel.

It sounded like a good idea. The storm had caused surprisingly little destruction, and the weather couldn't be any different from the wedding night. There were clouds, but they were the delicate, gentle kind that looked like they could be blown away by nothing but a breath. The sun was blinding and hot, almost uncomfortably so, but not quite. It was perfect for a day at the beach.

"Sorry about Nancy, again," Jonathan said when they met up in the lobby. Steve was (almost instinctively) looking around, hoping to catch a glimpse of Billy, but he was nowhere to be seen. Steve figured he was probably working.

"Yeah," he said absentmindedly, not really sure what Jonathan had said.

"You okay?" Jonathan asked.

"Yeah, I was just..." Steve hesitated. "I met this guy at the bar last night, before you called me. We met years ago, like in 2012 or

something. We got to talking and we're seeing each other again tomorrow."

"Hey, that's awesome. You finally have social life outside of your cat and Nancy and I," Jonathan said, and Steve fought back the urge to punch him.

—

The next day, Steve was anxious to meet Billy. He kept fidgeting with his cufflinks, which had been given to him by Jonathan and Nancy on his 25th birthday, and he felt sweat prickling his brow.

It all went away when he arrived in the lobby, though, because when he saw Billy waiting by a fancy indoor fountain, he didn't see the hot, grown up Billy at first. He saw the boy with a bruise on his cheek, a raggedy backpack bursting with beers, and an odd way with words.

This grown up Billy, though sporting the same grin and the long hair, looked much different. He wore a suit — something Steve could never have imagined the 15-year-old Billy wearing — and stood up straight, smiled politely at the hotel staff and checked the time from a working, expensive-looking watch.

"Hey," Steve greeted, feeling a little less awkward than on Saturday.

"Hi," Billy said and looked him up and down. "You look great."

"I'm wearing the same stuff that I did on Saturday," Steve pointed out.

"You looked great then and you look great now," Billy said casually.

"Oh. Thanks," Steve said. "You too."

"Ready to go?" Billy asked.

"Yeah, let's go," Steve said.

They could've taken a cab, but it was a nice day and the restaurant apparently wasn't that far away so Billy suggested walking. Steve was happy to; walking was less awkward than sitting in the back of a car.

At least they'd have something to do even if they ran out of conversation.

Their arms bumped together whenever they passed another person and had to squeeze a little closer to each other to make way. It made Steve think of the night they'd laid under the pier at a lookout, and Billy's arm had felt so unbelievably hot against his. He wondered if Billy's skin was still as warm.

"So... how long are you staying here?" Steve asked.

"Three more weeks. You?" Billy said.

"Until Saturday," Steve said. The rest of the guests had left early on Monday, but Nancy had insisted that he should take some time off work and have a proper holiday since he was traveling anyway.

"Got any plans?" Billy asked.

"Not really. I think I'll try to just... relax," Steve said. The word felt foreign on his tongue. Sure, he had opportunities for vacations, but he never had anyone to go with so it just felt like a waste.

"Well, if you need a guide again, I've got a few evenings off here and there. If you don't mind that I'm not a local this time," Billy suggested.

"I'll make sure to do that," Steve said, grinning. "Let's just not do any breaking and entering now that we're held accountable for our crimes, yeah?"

"That was a harmless venture, we never even got caught," Billy said dismissively.

"Right," Steve snorted.

The restaurant was one of the fancy, much too expensive ones that Mr. and Mrs. Harrington loved to frequent just for the sake of it. The lighting was dim, the waiters and waitresses wore expensive leather shoes and neatly cut suits, and every table was adorned with unique and intricate tropical flower arrangements.

Steve and Billy were the first to arrive, and a polite hostess led them to a table set for six. Steve sat next to Billy because he didn't feel comfortable sitting next to any strangers, especially as successful ones as Billy's co-workers.

While Billy ordered them a bottle of wine, Steve looked around to see what kind of food the restaurant served. Just a couple of glances at the surrounding tables was enough to let him know that it was seafood. The dishes were immaculately plated and much too tiny to satisfy anyone's appetite.

"I've always hated restaurants like this," Steve admitted, not really meaning to say it out loud.

"Yeah, it's pretentious as fuck," Billy agreed. "You pay a shit ton of money for something that doesn't even taste that great and won't keep you full for two whole minutes."

At least the wine was good, although Steve didn't even want to ask how expensive it was. They were almost done with their first glasses when two women arrived at the table, following the same hostess who had greeted Steve and Billy.

The woman whom Billy introduced to Steve as Kailani had a bright, wide smile and warm eyes, long wavy hair and round glasses. She was dressed in a colourful suit that Steve swore matched the flower arrangement on their table.

Kailani's wife, Anni, was tall and fair. Her shoulder length hair was dead straight, and her face was dotted with freckles. Her shoulders, which were exposed in the simple green dress she wore, looked slightly burnt.

"Billy told us how you met. Talk about a coincidence," Anni said once the introductions were over and done with. Steve couldn't quite place her accent.

"Yeah, it's crazy," Steve said because he wasn't sure how much Billy had told them.

"Did Billy tell you about our project?" Kailani asked as her glass was

being filled with alcohol-free champagne; she didn't drink.

"A bit," Steve said. "But I'm not great at, uh, you know. Anything to do with science-y stuff, so I don't really understand it. He showed me some footage, though, and it was really cool."

"I'm not so sure if he's allowed to do that, actually," Kailani pointed out, but she didn't sound malicious. In fact, it felt like she was just teasing him more than anything.

"Yeah, well. Had to lure him back in somehow, didn't I?" Billy said.

The last pair of guests to arrive were Mr. and Mrs. Miyasaki, an elderly couple who apparently funded a big part of Kailani's project and had arranged the whole dinner thing. Mr. Miyasaki had thick glasses and a flimsy beard, and Mrs. Miyasaki was slim and proper but had a happy twinkle in her eye.

The conversation wasn't as pretentious or scholarly as Steve had expected. Occasionally it turned more scientific and he couldn't quite keep up so he focused on eating and drinking, but mostly he was able to join in.

"So, Steve," Kailani said sometime during the third course. The wine was flowing at a steady pace and everyone felt much more loose and warm than they had when they first arrived. "What do you do?"

"Nothing special," Steve said evasively. As nice as the people around the table were, he felt small and insignificant in their company. "I work in my dad's company. We produce apps and stuff. You know, for phones. I don't like, actually make any apps myself, I'm in the uh... management side of it, I guess."

"Sounds interesting," Anni said, but they left it at that.

While everyone else got to talking about the project again, Steve filled his empty glass and took a long sip. He almost spilled it when he felt something brush against his leg. Billy flashed him a grin before turning to talk to his co-workers again, but kept his leg against Steve's. It was strangely comforting and tension inducing at once.

It could've been the wine — well, at least a part of it was definitely

because of the wine — but the restaurant's soft, dim lighting made Billy look a hundred times more beautiful than the hotel bar's harsh fluorescents. Looking at him, Steve felt as warm and fluttery as he had when he first started dating Nancy, except he shouldn't have because he wasn't 15 anymore and he hadn't had a crush on *anyone* since briefly dating Jonathan.

"Excuse me," he said in a slightly strained voice, set his glass down and left the table for the bathroom.

The men's restroom was coated in marble and shiny surfaces, like any tasteless rich person's bathroom. The taps were golden and there were leather ottomans against free walls because of course you need a place to sit in a bathroom. Steve ignored the decor and headed straight to the nearest sink to splash cold water on his face.

"Pull yourself together, Harrington," he muttered to himself.

"That's your last name, then?" said a voice behind him, and Steve nearly jumped. In the mirror, Billy looked slightly concerned but mostly amused, hands in pockets and a lopsided smile on his lips.

"I still don't know yours," Steve pointed out as casually as he could and turned to face Billy instead of looking at him through the mirror.

"Hargrove," Billy said quickly.

"That's... weirdly similar to mine," Steve said.

"Yeah, a little," Billy agreed. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," Steve said.

"If you say so," Billy said.

For a moment, they just looked at each other. Billy looked different than he had in Sydney, and different than the night of the wedding. He looked *soft*, like he was letting his guard down, and for that one moment Steve swore he knew Billy better than anyone else.

"Did I tell you that you look great?" Billy asked.

"You did," Steve said.

"Well, you do," Billy said.

"Thanks," Steve said for the second time that evening.

Billy reached out, and Steve didn't flinch away. Billy traced his lower lip with his thumb so softly Steve barely felt it.

"Can I?" Billy asked quietly.

"Yeah," Steve said in one breath.

And the next second, Billy's lips were against his and his skin was just as hot as Steve had remembered, one hand on Steve's neck and another firmly on the sink behind him.

Billy was a good kisser — better than Steve, at the very least, since it had been too long since Steve had had any sort of action. It was a little clumsy because there were bound to be awkward nose bumps and giggles in Steve's first kiss in almost a year, but it was just the right amount of rough and soft once he got a hang of it. Billy felt, simply put, *right*.

"Holy shit," Steve said when they separated enough to speak. They were still so close he could feel Billy's breath on his face; he smelled like white wine.

"Yeah. Holy shit," Billy agreed, looking a little started.

"Should we... uh, go back?" Steve stammered. Of course he would've preferred staying and making out some more, but he didn't want to ruin Billy's dinner.

"Erm... Yeah. Yeah, we should," Billy said.

They straightened their suit jackets, shared one more kiss — this one hurried, more of a peck — and returned to the table. Anni shot them an odd look — somewhere between amused and annoyed — but other than that they managed to sneak back in without any drama. Billy's leg found Steve's again, and they were pressed against each other under the table for the rest of the dinner.

Finishing up the dinner was a longwinded and tiring process that involved too many handshakes and business cards to count, promises to keep in touch and dry inside jokes that had developed during the dinner. It was dark outside when Steve and Billy finally exited the restaurant, giddy and wine-drunk and slightly wobbly on their feet. Once Kailani, Anni and the Miyasakis were out of sight, Billy grabbed Steve's hand so casually they might've been dating for years.

"I don't feel like going to sleep yet. Do you?" Billy asked as they walked along the street without a clear destination.

"What do you wanna do?" Steve said.

"There's a bar I like a few blocks away if you wanna grab a drink," Billy suggested. Steve thought it was a wonderful idea.

—

They ended up talking the entire night, basically just pouring their life stories onto each other's laps. They started off in the place Billy had mentioned, a small bar tucked away out of most tourists' sights that served cheap beer and had a good playlist. A few drinks later they walked down the beach until it got so late that almost everyone else had left, aside from the occasional late-night partier, and they sat down not giving a single shit about their suits getting sandy.

Steve learned that Billy had been married, at one point, but only for a year. It had been a spontaneous thing, anyway. Her name was Heather, and she had studied in the same university as Billy. Billy hadn't graduated at any point, but had developed a passion for photography and filmmaking and started freelancing as a wildlife photographer.

Billy, in turn, learned that Freddie was the best cat in the whole world and that Steve loved him very much. He learned about Nancy and Jonathan and the whole love triangle that Steve had gotten himself into.

They told each other secrets again. Steve told Billy that as happy as he was for Nancy and Jonathan, he still cared deeply about both of them and couldn't help the short-lived jealousy whenever he saw

them look particularly in love with each other. He told him that without Freddie, he probably wouldn't get himself out of bed on days he didn't have work. He told him how much he really disliked working for his dad, how insignificant he felt.

Billy told him about his struggles with his identity, how Heather had really been just his last attempt at heterosexuality. He told him about the time just a few years ago when he went to see his father for the first time in well over a decade, and how the man hadn't changed one bit.

It went on until their voices were raspy and the sky started turning a lighter shade. They were lying on the sand, facing each other, and Steve was tracing patterns on the back of Billy's hand. His eyelids felt like led and he was drifting in the hazy space between sleep and awake. In the back of his mind, he thought about suggesting going to bed, but didn't feel like getting up yet so he didn't say anything.

"I feel like I've known you my whole life," Billy whispered to him.

"Maybe you have," Steve said.

"That doesn't make sense," Billy pointed out.

"Your face doesn't make sense," Steve quipped, and Billy laughed wholeheartedly.

"Yours doesn't, either. It's too pretty," Billy said.

"Very smooth," Steve said dryly, but couldn't hide his smile.

In that moment Steve decided that no matter who he ended up marrying and whether Billy would stay in his life, his and Billy's love story would be the one he'd tell his grandkids over and over until they remembered every detail.

Notes for the Chapter:

Took a little longer than I expected but here ya go, part 2! I'm thinking of doing little spin-off chapters in another work so stay tuned for those if you're interested :)